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**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
Governor's Budget Proposal – Elimination of the Commissions
Submitted by Maggie Adair, Policy Director
Connecticut Association for Human Services
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Good evening, Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Maggie Adair, Policy Director of the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide nonprofit organization that works to end poverty and to engage, equip, and empower all families in Connecticut to build a secure future.

Faced with a precipitous drop in state revenue and a budget deficit in the billions, policymakers must now make difficult decisions. CAHS believes that Governor Rell and our state legislators should take the long view on budget priorities, preserving the integrity of programs and policies that support children, families, and the well-being of the state.

I am testifying in opposition to the Governor's proposal to eliminate commissions that advocate for people who are often the most vulnerable in our society. The commissions I am referring to are: Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Children, the African-American Affairs Commission, the Commission on Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs, and the Commission on Aging. The Commissions serve an important purpose in providing a voice for these constituencies and promoting public policy that improves the lives of women, children, elderly, and minority populations.

In the current unprecedented economic downturn, the demand for public service escalates as more and more individuals lose financial ground and struggle to make ends meet. Middle-class people are being laid off at an astonishing pace and find themselves seeking support they have never sought before. Low-wage earners are losing their jobs and do not have any financial cushion to soften the financial blow. We know that the demand for food stamps, now known as SNAP, has significantly increased in Connecticut because more and more families cannot afford to put food on the table. HUSKY enrollment is rising as well.

Connecticut's poverty rate will increase as the recession grows deeper and deeper. As more and more people are hit by the economic tsunami, the Governor's budget cuts vital services to our most vulnerable citizens. Now more than ever, we need voices to highlight the short-sightedness of cutting services when the demand is greater than ever. The Commissions provide that unique voice for each of their constituents.

Our work at CAHS focuses on family economic security. We promote policies that support families as they move along an economic continuum, from meeting basic needs, to financial education, building assets, obtaining an education and landing a good-paying job. Because of this focus, CAHS is most familiar with the work of the Commission on Children and the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. CAHS is highly impressed with the depth and breadth of their work and the results they achieve on behalf of women and children.

I am aware that the Commission on Children will technically be heard by this Committee next week. However, it seems to make sense for CAHS to speak on behalf of the Commissions in one piece of testimony.

The Commission on Children is a diligent advocate for children and families. The Commission: develops smart, results-driven policy; brings in federal and philanthropic dollars to the state; conducts research on children's needs; and empower parents to become community leaders. It has played a role in key policies over the years in the areas of early childhood education, adoption reform, prevention, child poverty, and health.

Elaine Zimmerman, the Commission's Executive Director, has provided an effective and needed voice at the Early Childhood Cabinet and the Child Poverty and Prevention Council. We cannot lose the passion, expertise, and results that the Commission on Children provides to the state of Connecticut.

Likewise, the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women is the leading voices on issues of equity and opportunity for women. PCSW is the only state entity that evaluates laws and policies for their impact on women and their families. Women need a strong advocate as they are paid less than men, suffer from sexual harassment and discrimination, receive less health care than men, continue to serve as the core caregiver of the family, and still cannot break the glass ceiling.

PCSW has been responsible for passage of landmark legislation, including protecting pregnant workers, defining and prohibiting sexual harassment, creating the first family and medical leave protections in the country, and requiring a 48-hour hospital stay for normal childbirth.

I have remarked specifically on the Commission on Children and the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women because we have worked most closely with them. However, CAHS is just as concerned that we support advocacy voices of the other commissions. In these difficult times, we cannot suppress voices for our most vulnerable people.

A balanced budget that disproportionately hits the most vulnerable members of our society who have the least opportunity to present their interests before state government is not a budget that the people of Connecticut can be proud of. We are counting on the Appropriations Committee to work with the Finance, Revenue, and Bonding Committee and members of the House and Senate leadership to craft a budget that reflects equity as well as fiscal responsibility.